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Limits On The Press's Function As A Public Forum: An International Study Of Environmental News

This paper discusses the extent to which the press functions as a public forum for contemporary ideas and social debate. A comparison of environmental news in newspapers from Australia, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom underlines how each newspaper has its own "culture" linked to its own priorities. This culture largely defines what comes in the news. The existence of different cultures might suggest that there is a very diverse press, but the scope of ideas circulated by the press stays well within undefined yet clear boundaries. Only independent newspapers, such as Le Monde and The Guardian, sometimes venture beyond these boundaries. Differences in the portrayal of governments in environmental reporting were also evident in this study. The Australian media adopts a very cynical attitude towards government, which is no more conducive to a democratic debate than is the servility displayed by some European papers towards particular government bodies or industry.

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This is a comparative study of the press's reporting of environmental issues in Australia, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. The study analyses to what extent we can discern different "cultures" in the reporting of environmental issues. It is part of a larger project involving comparative and longitudinal research on press reporting of the public issues of the environment, unemployment, and welfare. It is argued that the nature of the reporting of these issues can be viewed as an indicator of the extent to which the press functions, or does not function, as a public forum for contemporary ideas and social debate and how this differs from newspaper to newspaper.

The significance of the study lies in the important role attributed to the media in Western democracies. It is via the mass media that most people learn about the world and about their

own country. Mass media play a very important role in the process of generation and transmission of knowledge about society -- crucial knowledge when it comes to participating in society and taking on the political responsibilities inherent in a democracy. It is in recognition of this role that the press has received special protection and that freedom of the press has been guaranteed by Western democracies. Western countries not only pride themselves on having a democratic system guaranteeing an independent and free press, but also see the existence of a free press as being a condition *sine qua non* for democracy. The press has historically played a major role in the establishment of democracy in Western countries. According to Hartley (1996:76), journalism was one of the principal means by which democratic energies were excited into existence and then diffused across the people.

It is clear that the press is only a small part of the contemporary "mediasphere" and that the quick developments of new technology leave quite a few uncertainties about the future of the press. The growth of the internet, particularly, could be seen as a menace for the traditional press, already confronted by an eroding readership. But traditional media are also becoming part of cyberspace. The fact that all the newspapers analysed here have a news website suggests that their contents and ways of seeing will have a continuing influence.

The idea behind the establishment of freedom of the press was that it would allow the creation of a free forum for the expression of ideas. While media representatives today defend the principle of freedom of speech as being the key to democracy, questions have been raised about the extent to which the principle of freedom of speech is indeed reflected in Western media systems. Many researchers argue that the media have failed to act as the type of forum of ideas needed to ensure an informed citizenship (Murdock & Golding 1989; Golding 1994; McKnight 1997; Brune 1997). News, it is argued, has become a commodity and newspapers have been largely redefined as business enterprises, while the organisation and coordination of media operations have been taken over by a managerial class (Underwood 1993). This, of course, has influenced the way newspapers are run and the editorial processes involved (Baldasty 1992; Underwood 1993). At the same time, the number of media owners has been, and is continuing to be, reduced to a small number of media conglomerates.

The implications of these changes for news content has been discussed by various researchers (Mancini 1991; Baldasty 1992; Hoggart 1995; Hart 1996; McKnight 1997). According to Cappella and Jamieson (1996), media content plays a role in creating cynicism, not only towards the media itself, but also towards the

government. The same distrust felt for the media by the public has been discussed by Schultz (1994:35). Several studies concluded that these changes have had a negative impact on citizens' participation in public and political life (Entman 1989; Murdoch & Golding 1989; Cappella & Jamieson 1996; Hart 1996; Brune 1997; McKnight 1997) and that the public has lost confidence in politicians (Squires 1994; Cappella & Jamieson 1996; Hart 1996; Patterson 1996). Researchers have also found that this has had a negative impact on citizens' participation in public and political life (Entman 1989; Murdoch & Golding 1989; Cappella & Jamieson 1996; Hart 1996; Brune 1997; McKnight 1997) and that the public-as-citizen is short-changed by these developments. In turn, this has contributed to the public's lost confidence in politicians (Squires 1994; Cappella & Jamieson 1996; Hart 1996; Patterson 1996). Never in human history has there been so much information available, but this information provision is accused of sedating rather than informing the public.

This study aims to explore and assess these findings and arguments by analysing and comparing daily reporting on the environment in a number of major newspapers from Australia, Belgium, France and England. In each of these countries, the press has its own characteristics. For example, the Australian press is known for its high concentration of media ownership; in Belgium, the press has traditionally been a subsidised opinion press, but the subsidies have not stopped concentration; the French press is renowned as a very strong opinion press, while the English press has its own history marked by media barons and a very high press readership. In this study, news is conceived of as a particular type of discourse (Dijk 1991) and as a mechanism for ordering the world that produces knowledge by interrelating and giving coherence to disparate elements within it (Ericson et al 1987).

Environment Reportage: Existing Research

The role of mass media in the circulation of environmental meaning is crucial (Cottle 1993) and it is therefore not surprising that many communication researchers have concentrated on environmental reporting. A substantial amount of research attempts to establish a relationship between environmental reporting and public opinion on the environment (Hansen 1991; Burgess et al 1991). Tuchman (1977) underlines how difficult it was for environmental issues to become part of the news agenda in the 1970s because of the absence of a news-beat devoted to the area. More recently, Love (1990, cited in Hansen 1991:148-9) found that this had changed and that "most 'quality' media and a number of 'popular' media now have a designated environment news-beat". Anderson (1991, 1993) focuses on environmental

organisations, studying the strategies employed by these groups to achieve media attention. In particular, Hansen (1993) analyses the role of Greenpeace as an agenda builder of environmental issues.

Other researchers have concentrated on who defines the environmental issues reported by the media (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). Generally, researchers have concluded that environmental groups were placed well behind government agencies, the industry and scientists in defining environmental news (Hansen 1991; Molotch and Lester 1975; Patterson 1996). Similarly Daley and O'Neill (1991), after analysing the press coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, concluded that the preponderance of press coverage favoured government and industry officials and that native Alaskans were excluded from the debate. Molotch and Lester (1975) in their research on the Santa Barbara oil spill also concluded that news reporting favoured the powerful. Cottle (1993:120), after examining environmental reporting on British television news, found that, while there was no open and equal access, there was no dominant elite monopolising the environmental media stage either. Similarly Einsiedel and Coughlan (1993:147-8) concluded that "to say that the media simply reproduce the dominant field of ruling of ideologies is too simplistic".

Hansen (1991) insists that the cultural givens of a society have to be taken into account when analysing the media because of the role they play in framing environmental reporting. As cultural givens he cites the belief in mastery over nature and in progress through science and technology which, according to him, contributes to scientists being positioned as arbiters in the discourse on the environment. Anna Triandafyllidou (1996:371), in her research on environmental discourse in the Italian press, argues that "the content and form of media discourse are, to a large extent, contingent upon the social, political and cognitive attitudes prevalent within a given society". Gamson and Modigliani (1989:2) agree that the cultural system is also very important: "On most policy issues, there are competing packages available in this culture. Indeed, we can view policy issues as, in part, a symbolic contest over which interpretation will prevail. This cultural system has a logic and dynamic of its own".

Gamson and Modigliani (1989:2) also argue that "parallel to this cultural level is a cognitive one of individuals making sense of the same issue". The research reported in this paper does not tackle directly the issue of readers/viewers' sense-making process of news. This is not because its importance is underestimated but because it would give another dimension to the project that is beyond its scope.

While it is clear that the construction of meanings operates at a variety of levels, this research will look at how each newspaper chooses and reports news. The role played by national, regional, and cultural differences will, of course, be taken into account, but it is how the more specific "cultural sphere" of each newspaper articulates and frames public issues that forms the object of research. Each newspaper has its own priorities and aims that define its culture. Sometimes those priorities and aims are explicitly announced. This is often the case with the European opinion press. Other newspapers affect to have a neutral position, but nevertheless privilege particular ways of seeing. Cottle (1993:125), who carried out a very similar study on British television programs, found that the environment was submitted to differential news treatment according to the established priorities and forms of existing British news programs.

We are well aware that the different levels of sense making compete with or reinforce each other constantly. The environment, says Cottle (1993), has become a contested terrain, dependent upon the social meanings and frameworks of understanding within the wider culture. This phenomenon of competition and reinforcement also exists within each newspaper. The research is about interpretations, choices and frames. It is about the media's mediating role between social phenomena and people. The media are not only transmitting information but are making claims that most citizens cannot correct.

Methodology

The newspapers analysed in this study are all broadsheets and considered to be leading public opinion papers in their respective countries. *The Australian* is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Ltd and *The Age* by the Fairfax group, which is Australia's oldest newspaper group and the country's second largest newspaper publisher behind News Corporation. *Le Soir* was created in Belgium as a "neutral" paper and belongs to the Rossel group, which owns several papers in France and Belgium. *De Standaard* is part of another large Belgian press group, *De Vlaamse Uitgevers Maatschappij*. According to its statutes, the paper aims to defend Christian tradition, the interests of the Flemish people, a plural political democracy and a free economy. *Le Figaro* belongs to the Hersant group, which has a right-wing pro-Gaullist slant. *Le Monde* is an independent paper which favours socialist viewpoints. *The Times* has been owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International group since 1979, while *The Guardian* is an independent paper with a liberal tradition.

All articles referring to the environment in a sample of two constructed weeks in 1998 have been analysed. This method of

sampling has the advantage of giving a broadly representative sample of daily news. Environmental articles, for the purpose of this research, are defined as articles relating to the earth's natural environment. Gardening and agricultural articles without any mention of general environmental impacts were not included, nor were daily weather reports. It is clear that this definition can be interpreted and applied variously. But since the same approach to selection was made for all the newspapers, it does provide us with comparable material.

The sample was first submitted to a broad quantitative analysis. The aim of this analysis was to establish the percentage of news dedicated to the environment and to find out how often various sources of news -- the originators of the stories or the main authorities quoted -- were used. I found that the majority of articles could indeed be traced back to an initial main source. These included government representatives, politicians belonging to green parties, environmental groups, representatives from industry, agricultural representatives, security and justice representatives -- for example, from the police, the army or the judiciary, private citizens and editorials. In addition, there were some non-attributed briefs, as in the case of articles signed by press agencies, as well as articles for which the main source was unclear.

News sources are important because, for the environment to be reported regularly (i.e. other than when major events such as oil spills occur), somebody has to actively promote the story. This is mainly due to the fact that environmental issues mostly develop over long periods of time. For example, the pollution effects of greenhouse gas emissions are slow and progressive and not sudden and dramatic. This limits the possibility of their becoming news. Because journalism is event oriented, sudden, violent or dramatic occurrences are more likely to be recognised by journalists as newsworthy. Daily matters relating to the environment "only become known because someone makes claims about them" (Hansen 1991:449). Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 6) also found that environmental news packages frequently have "sponsors", which are usually governmental or non-governmental organisations and which largely define the story. News sources are also often the main news actors. These actors are important in two ways: firstly because of their role as news promoters and definers and, secondly, because of their role as objects of news.

The news stories were then submitted to a qualitative analysis aimed at uncovering how each newspaper treats news sources and news actors, how issues are related to these sources and actors, how the issues are framed, and the patterns that emerge from all this.

Findings

Overall, there is little environment news in the newspapers analysed. The number of articles on environmental matters accounts on average for about 1.75% of all the information. The most was found in *The Age* (2.6%), *Le Monde* (2.2%) and *The Guardian* (1.8%). In *De Standaard*, 1.7% of articles were on the environment and in *Le Figaro*, 1.6%, whereas in *The Australian*, *Le Soir* and *The Times*, only 1.5% of articles were on the environment.

An analysis of sources (see Table 1) confirms that government sources outnumber all other sources of news (Molotch Lester 1974; Tuchman 1977; Fishman 1982; Benett et al 1985, Hansen 1991). Governments are the main source of 29.5% of the stories on the environment, while news coming from environment advocates and business sources accounts for 14.5% and 12% respectively. It is, however, important to note that the frequency of use of news sources provides only limited information on the news process. The fact that an organisation is used as a news source confers a legitimacy on that organisation but disguises the fact that this legitimacy might only apply to certain areas. Which news sources are used when and where depends very much on each newspaper's priorities defined by its culture. In other words, while newspapers select news according to criteria of newsworthiness, which are very similar from newspaper to newspaper (Galtung and Ruge 1981; Hartley 1982; Ericsson et al 1987), this appears to be followed by a secondary selection operating according to the values that define each newspaper's culture. The fact that newspapers each have their own value system, which journalists quickly come to understand, was highlighted by Breed (1955) in his study on the socialisation of journalists. Sigelman (1973) also found that journalists tend to work according to the newspaper's values via a subtle process of osmosis.

While all newspapers rely heavily on government sources for their information, the sources used vary widely and are given different treatment by each newspaper.

The Australian stands out for its equal use of government and industry sources. In practice, *The Australian* seems to function very much as a platform for discussion between different members of industry and government. Government information used by *The Australian* is clearly addressed to industry. Many stories involve the presentation of plans which might be of interest to it. The same use of the newspaper as a platform for discussion between government and the industry is noticeable in *De Standaard*.

The Age and *Le Soir* both stand out for their extensive use of local city councils as a source of information. This highlights the tendency of both newspapers, which have built up strong links

Table 1:
Sources of Environmental News

main source	<i>The Age</i>	<i>Australian</i>	<i>Standaard</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>Le Figaro</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>The Times</i>	<i>Guardian</i>	total
government representatives	18	8	11	19	11	9	15	8	99
green politicians	1	0	0	1	0	5	1	0	8
environmental advocates	10	4	3	2	3	3	8	15	48
agricultural representatives	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	6
business/industry representatives	4	8	3	7	4	3	6	5	38
scientific experts	12	4	1	0	4	3	2	3	29
security and justice representatives	4	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	11
unsourced briefs	1	1	4	5	4	3	2	0	20
private citizen private letters	8	5	0	2	1	2	2	0	20
editorials	1	1	3	2	2	6	2	4	21
unclear	2	0	4	1	7	3	4	8	29
Total	63	32	29	40	37	39	44	45	329

with local councils, to concentrate more on local news. *Le Soir*, particularly, transmits a great deal of information that comes directly from the local councils. These are often local council decisions that are likely to have a practical impact on a city or a village, and are often couched in the form of reassurances. In fact, one might say that *Le Soir* is almost the voice of this arm of government.

The political sympathies held by *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* are clearly reflected in their choice of sources. *Le Monde* will, for instance, make regular use of green government members. This, of course, leads to regular reports on green politics. In *Le Figaro*, no green politicians function as government sources. The government sources that it does use mainly intervene to reassure on environmental problems, as if to re-establish an existing status quo. Compared to *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro's* reporting is rather non-committal, as if some environmental problems are simply

unavoidable. *Le Monde* has a series of articles questioning the privatisation of water. The subject is not touched by *Le Figaro*. The same differences exist between *The Guardian*, which also launches a debate on the privatisation of water, and *The Times*, which ignores the issue. These differences reflect the ideological gap existing between *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*. *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* are more progressive and focus more on social equity issues. They are therefore much more sympathetic to the message of the Green Party, which in France has taken a clear political line aligning itself with the Socialist Party. Given a voice by *Le Monde*, green sources often initiate debate around lifestyle and social choices and the possibility for fundamental policy changes.

The reporting of a car free day organised in France on September 22 is interesting because it highlights the different ways newspapers frame events. This event was widely covered in both French papers, as well as in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Le Soir*. Only *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* framed the event as a positive initiative based on people's desire for a better quality of life. *Le Monde* heralded it as a first step in a change of behaviour that could ultimately "reconquer the air", questioning in the process the general use of private cars. By contrast, *Le Figaro* presented it as an interesting, but mainly entertaining, event since city pollution is a necessary evil, adding that it was not all well organised. *Le Soir* framed it as an exceptional and daring event. The headline of a *Times*' article read: "French drivers fume on a day without cars" (23 September 1998:5), describing the day as "a brave but hopeless attempt to wean its citizen away from their beloved cars".

Finding environmental articles in the business pages is not uncommon. Here, environmental matters become part of a larger financial or business issue in which the costs associated with environmental matters is always underscored, as is the willingness of companies to cover these costs or invest in environmentally-friendly schemes. Environmental mishaps are sometimes described in these articles, but they are always presented as rare, not unsafe, and easily fixed by spending money. Whenever necessary, business uses scientists to support its view, reflecting Hansen's (1991) finding that, in environmental news, scientists assume the role of arbiter. When articles emanate from the business world, the experts they refer to are experts who will defend their cause. For example, in an article in *The Australian* (12 December 1998:10): "Dumper sells what no one is buying", an "eminent" scientist "praised" the plan [to bury nuclear waste in Australia].

Similarly, *De Standaard* uses experts to dismiss the potential dangers posed by nuclear products and other pollutants,

overemphasising what is done to control pollution. *The Times* and *Le Figaro* adopt the same pro-nuclear stand, using experts to dismiss potential dangers. The regular reporting of nuclear issues may owe much to the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island accidents that contributed to conferring newsworthiness on nuclear stories. The stories reported by *De Standaard*, *Le Figaro* and *The Times* all revolve around the possibility of a repeat of such accidents. They are not presented as a warning, but as repeated reassurances. *The Times* and *De Standaard* cover nuclear issues the most, constantly minimising the danger of nuclear products, while promoting their use. A nuclear contamination of train wagons was reported under the unassuming heading "Nuclear product not to La Hague" (*De Standaard*, 6 November 1998:3).

When the importance of headlines is considered in activating relevant knowledge in memory and in acting as an organising principle for the representation of news in the memory (Van Dijk 1991:50), it is clear that the title attempts to neutralise the event. This story is also covered by *Le Figaro* in a rather discreet article, which limits itself to reporting the ministers' reactions. ("Nuclear transport: the Ministers react", 29 May 1998:9). A similar treatment appears in an article published in *Le Figaro* following a water leak in a nuclear plant: "EDF will check the reactors in its latest nuclear power plants" (29 May 1998:14). Technical arguments are used to reassure readers and insist upon the fact that the incident did not, and could not, cause any harm to the environment; nor could it evolve into a Chernobyl or Three Mile Island type situation. Thus, the article opposes rationality (represented by scientists using technical arguments) to what it presents as irrational fears. *The Times* also consistently defends the government's nuclear policy and stands in contrast with *The Guardian* more critical attitude.

News coming from government and business sources generally tends to measure environmental issues in economic terms. The idea that care of the environment is part of ensuring a better quality of life is almost non-existent, unless quality of life is viewed in economic terms. Only *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* introduce the idea that taking care of the environment is making a choice for a more harmonious way of life. When other newspapers reflect on lifestyle, it is done in terms of an economic, material lifestyle. Most newspapers frame the environment as an expensive choice which has led to unemployment, but by the same token also as a business opportunity which can create employment. While taking care of the environment can cost money, it also has the potential to create jobs. Business sources also stress repeatedly that taking care of the environment is a way to attract consumers. Articles emanating from industry on the

environment are often public relations exercises. Business is eager to project itself as doing its bit for the environment.

Sources and framing

This research also found that the framing of stories is directly related to the main source. For example, economic framing of environmental issues is generally not present in articles emanating from environmental sources. The stories this group manages to get in the news are often either simple and non-controversial or are local protest stories.

When it comes to reporting the environment generally, simple stories dominate. Table 2 lists all environmental stories. It shows that stories in the categories "animal and plant life" and "countryside protection" are the most frequent. Together they account for 30% of the environmental news. "Animal and plant life" stories are generally non-ambiguous and simple stories, covering the plight of animals and plants. Publishing this type of story does not risk alienating the sympathies of readers. *The Times* and *The Age* publish a large amount of such "entertainment" stories.

Simplicity is also at the root of the coverage of "countryside protection" issues. They are often articles about the planning of parks, rivers and the general countryside. *The Age* and *Le Soir* have many such stories because of their emphasis on local news. Where animal and plant stories are often presented by scientists and environmental groups, countryside stories more often originate from government sources who lay out their management plans. Environmental sources also frequently express protest against government initiatives, protecting the countryside from a bureaucracy that is often portrayed as having very little sensitivity for local human issues. This is part of *The Age's* highly critical portrayal of government in general. Overall, no real political role is attributed to environmental groups, except in *The Guardian*, where the "environmental lobby" is depicted as having a clear political force. In *Le Monde*, this political role is attributed to green politicians in power.

The reporting of exceptional weather conditions also illustrates the newspapers' different approaches. In early 1998, several big storms raged in Europe while Australia faced an exceptionally hot summer. This led to a series of articles reporting the exceptional weather conditions. Most newspapers simplify this type of news, rarely relating it to broader environmental issues. Only *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* tended to include more background reporting, relating it to other environmental issues such as global warming.

Table 2:
Environmental Issues in the News

	<i>The Age</i>	<i>The Australian</i>	<i>De Standard</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>Le Figaro</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>The Times</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	Total
air pollution	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	8
city pollution	2	1	2	4	13	7	3	3	35
ground pollution	0	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	5
water pollution purification	0	1	2	2	2	3	1	4	15
waste disposal	8	0	2	9	0	3	0	1	23
nuclear issues	1	1	6	1	3	3	11	6	32
crops/ food	2	1	2	1	5	1	2	5	19
energy	1	4	1	2	0	3	0	2	13
weather pattern	5	1	3	2	3	3	5	7	29
animal/ plant life	20	5	2	0	4	3	12	11	57
countryside protection	14	7	3	6	3	3	5	1	42
green politics	4	5	1	1	0	4	4	3	22
business ethics	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	5
varia	5	4	3	7	3	2	0	0	24
Total	63	32	29	40	37	39	44	45	329

The representation of governments

The European newspapers in the study generally attribute an organising role to their governments. All newspapers, particularly the French and Belgian, report government environmental projects regularly, presenting the government as playing a major role in the daily functioning of the country. The Australian press has a much more cynical attitude towards government. In *The Australian*, governments seem almost exclusively to feature in relation to election promises. For *The Age*, it is as if everything the central government does creates problems.

News Actors And News Culture

Government is also portrayed as unable to manage the environment. The idea that government is only working for itself and mainly preoccupied with its own profile recurs in the Australian newspapers and probably reflects, as Triandafyllidou (1996) argues, a broader cultural phenomenon. It is questionable whether such cynicism towards government is constructive in fostering political discussion.

Such a degree of cynicism was not found in the European newspapers. This is surprising considering the amount of political scandal rocking Belgium, France and the UK at the time. While articles appear in these newspapers reporting politicians tried for fraud, corruption or other illegal and often very serious matters, this news does not permeate other reporting, where the idea of government as a useful institution, albeit sometimes badly working, is still prevalent. The strong links between the press and the government certainly play a role in ensuring the press's lack of criticism of government. This is particularly clear in the four Belgian and French newspapers, which voice very little criticism of the government sources they use. The utility of this attitude of compliance is also questionable in a democratic context

Environmental groups as news actors

The way green groups are portrayed by the different newspapers probably tells us more about the newspapers than about the green groups themselves. When it comes to portraying environmental sources, the efforts carried out by *The Australian*, *Le Figaro* and *De Standaard* to delegitimise environmental groups is in strong contrast with the legitimacy those papers confer on business groups. As Van Dijk (1991:147) argues: "the way the press presents and represents social actors is part of a broader ideological structure of values. It is this ideology that explains why specific groups are dealt with positively or negatively". The idea of a "lack of rationality" among groups fighting for the environment seems to be a much repeated one. The opposition between the rational "we", in this case representing industry, and the irrational "they", representing environmental groups, has also been identified by Van Dijk (1998:58) as polarising in-groups and out-groups, following an ideological pattern.

Business as news actor

Business is projected in the papers as doing its bit for the environment within the context of its need to remain competitive.

This element of competitiveness is central to the perspective of *The Australian*, *De Standaard* and *The Age* and is something that is taken for granted as part of the "rational". The industry consistently uses the notion of rationality to promote or defend itself. *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* are the only papers that (rarely) take a tougher stand on business practices by initiating a debate on sustainable development.

Private citizens in the news

Private citizen do not often function as news sources, except in letters to the editor. While letters to the editor are a common feature of the Anglo-Saxon press, the Belgian and French press publish few letters. To what extent the letters section functions as a forum for the expression of private people's ideas can be debated; since many letters have been written by organisations. Those written by private people often seem to illustrate points made by the newspaper.

Private citizen are sometimes used as sources of news to comment on events. *Le Figaro* did this extensively in its reporting of the car-free day, elaborating on private citizen's emotive reactions. This inclusion of quotes from "ordinary people" who reveal their own subjective emotional experience is a common practice in tabloids. An editorial on genetic manipulation shows how *Le Figaro* attributes quite a different role to the general public when it comes to making decisions (*Le Figaro*, 7 June 1998:10). The article denounces a Swiss referendum, arguing that ordinary people do not really know what they are voting for. This contrasts with *The Guardian's* reporting of the convening of Britain's first "citizen's jury" on genetically-modified soy beans ("Choice cut", *The Guardian*, 23 September 1998:4), in which the paper legitimises the jury's decision-making power.

While newspapers rarely report industrial pollution, private citizens are frequently asked to take responsibility for environmental problems. Thus *Le Soir* gives a clear impression that the pollution is generated by private citizen, regularly emphasising that the responsibility of keeping the environment clean lies with them.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that each newspaper has its own culture and that this culture defines how news sources will be used and what type of news will be printed. While *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *De Standaard* and *The Guardian* openly claim allegiance to certain ideas or political groups, the other newspapers prefer to position themselves as neutral, despite having a clear culture to which a set of values is attached.

While the existence of a series of newspapers, each with its own culture, might point to the existence of press diversity, in reality, many of the values supported by the different cultures are very similar. There is a general indulgence of business practices and an overall framing of environment news in economic terms. The abundant publishing of business stories stands in contrast with the attitude developed towards green groups. While environmental sources are prominent, they are used generally to comment on specific and narrow issues, which are reported without exploring their wider implications. The fact that environmental groups might have a political role to play goes unreported. *The Australian*, *De Standaard*, *The Times* and *Le Figaro* rely very little on green sources and portray them in very critical terms. *The Guardian* is the only newspaper where reporting legitimises environmental groups. Together with *Le Monde*, it is also the only newspaper that discusses, albeit rarely, environmental issues in relation to long-term quality of life issues.

Differences have been noted in the way Australian and European papers portray government. The Australian press adopts a very cynical attitude towards government as an institution which it equates with bureaucracy. In the European press, governments clearly have a role to play in organising or policing the environment. While the cynical Australian attitude is part of the broader Australian culture, by accenting it, the press serves to negate any positive role the government could play in the area of the environment. This attitude is in opposition to that of the Belgian and French press which, while attributing a role to government, tend to display a rather servile attitude.

All this shows that there is very little attempt from the press to explore issues beyond well-established boundaries, which are limited by newspapers' cultures as well as by more general news gathering practices. This imposes clear limits on the extent to which the press functions as a public forum for the exchange of ideas. ■

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